

Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE
Region 8
Albuquerque, New Mexico

- - -

Hugh G. Calkins
Regional Conservator

REGIONAL PLANNING IN THE PACIFIC
NORTHWEST: A MEMORANDUM

By

Lewis Mumford

For: Northwest Regional Council
January 3, 1939

LIBRARY
Soil Conservation Service
Department of Agriculture
Washington, D. C.

Regional Bulletin No. 64
Current Discussion Series #3
January 12, 1940.

FOREWORD

A number of economists and sociologists in the Department of Agriculture were recently asked to indicate what they considered to be the most important problems of agriculture. Uppermost in the minds of the majority of them seemed to be two problems. As stated in the December 1939 issue of the Agricultural Situation, these were

1. The low level and the instability of agricultural income.
2. Patterns of land use that are not favorable to the conservation of resources.

Both of these problems involve important questions of public policy with reference to rural life and with reference to the use of agricultural resources. But the broad national sweep of these problems has a basic regional pattern. In each case they refer to specific problems of people living within the structure of a given economy and within a given space.

The paper we are reprinting as the third in the Current Discussion Series deals with a regional problem, that of the Pacific Northwest. Its author, Lewis Mumford, has long been interested in problems of regional development. An able critic and publicist, his statement of the problem of regional development in the Culture of Cities is the most profound and scholarly treatment of the subject by any American author.

REGIONAL PLANNING IN THE PACIFIC
NORTHWEST: A MEMORANDUM

GENERAL IMPRESSIONS

The two weeks tour that I made of the coastal portions of the Northwest had the advantage, just because my movements were so rapid, of leaving two distinct images of the landscape. One was of its overpowering beauty; the other was of its loneliness. At every point in my journey, from the McKenzie River to Puget Sound, there were breathtaking landscapes: now the great simplicity of the towering Douglas firs, repeated mile after mile, now the genial farm-and-orchard landscape of the Willamette Valley, or again the subtle and manifold beauties of the Columbia River Gorge, which unrolls itself like some great kakemono of classic Chinese landscape art. But at the same time one had a sense of unoccupied space: though one was on an automobile road, one wouldn't have been surprised to see a covered wagon with a weatherbeaten pioneer family stalking alongside, cross the highway.

The whole "Oregon Country" is a region that has been partly defaced, but not yet, one feels, fully mastered. This impression is accentuated by the cities; one feels that Portland and Seattle began to grow in the nineties, at the expense of the hinterland, before they had even given the rural areas of their states sufficient time to develop. While little provincial administrative seats, like Salem or Olympia, have the air of quiet and well-assured development, neither Portland nor Seattle show, from the standpoint of planning, more than metropolitan ambitions that have over-reached themselves. The melancholy plan to increase Portland's population from 300,000 to three million succeeded in disordering and unfocussing its growth: but it did

little to give it the benefit of modern city planning practice; meanwhile, the apparent financial prospects of these port cities undermined the base of the sounder development that could well have been taking place in other parts of the region, on strictly modern lines.

The lure of metropolitan congestion is, one sees, the other side of the loneliness of the hinterland. And the two things must be treated together: the development and settlement of the Northwest involves transforming the metropolises themselves into regional centers and taking positive measures to build up cities with a strong industrial and cultural base in other parts of the country. Many false ambitions and stultifying slogans must be abandoned in this process: what is involved in planning for this region is not merely control but "change of direction." In the past, financial success has been the justification of even anti-social actions, such as the mining of the forests. In the future, social achievement will be the only means of justifying economic success.

PROBLEMS OF POLICY

The natural resources of the Northwest give it claim to a far larger proportion of the country's population than it yet possesses, many of its lonely areas cry for occupation and settlement. At present, there are two curbs upon the increase of population. The more important is the general slowing down of population increase that is taking place all over the world, based upon the widened use of contraceptives and perhaps quickened by the state of insecurity and fear in which the masses now live. This reverses the population curve of the nineteenth century: the result will be that by around 1955 population will be stable in most Sections of the United States; and indeed, were it not

for immigration from other states, this stability would apparently already have been reached in parts of the Northwest. From this time on, population will be on a replacement basis: this means a drastic slowing down of urban growth, and it puts a quietus upon all grandiose metropolitan plans for expansion, unless it could be assumed that the special advantages of metropolitan congestion will enable it to drain out effectively other small cities.

For the eastern part of the United States this slowing down is to be welcomed: it gives our cities and regions the necessary time to catch up on long arrears, to repair the damages made by over-rapid and heedless growth, and to create a more stable framework of urban culture. For the Northwest, however, the blessing is not altogether an unmixed one: indeed, I am prepared to say that it will handicap good development almost as much as it will handicap the grandiose, speculative, anti-social development that took place in the past and to whose absence many financial and industrial interests have not as yet learned to accommodate themselves or their plans. Since it is unlikely that any serious change will take place in the birth and death rate during the next generation to alter present tendencies, one is driven to examine the other cause of population decline in the United States: the shutting off of immigration.

UNEMPLOYMENT IS NOT A POPULATION PROBLEM

The reduction of immigration into the United States came about as a result of a complex of reasons: the realization during the war that we had failed to assimilate many foreign groups, the desire to avoid competition from alien groups having a lower living standard than the American worker, and the desire on the part of the trade unions to

limit the labor market as a means of raising wages. There was some color in all of these reasons. Though one may quarrel with the fixed rate of immigration permitted, and above all with the arbitrary discrimination between "desirable" groups and with the arbitrary point taken to fix quotas, most political students will not quarrel with the principles of selectivity and control.

In addition to the original case against permitting large-scale immigration, many people see in the present industrial crisis an additional reason against permitting immigration: unemployment. From this point of view, each new immigrant is potentially a new unemployable: potentially also, under the present policy, an active public charge. But there is a great difference between saying that, at any given point of time, the greater the population the greater the unemployment and saying that unemployment is due to an increase in population. If that had been so, the expansion of population and the expansion of industry would not, in the nineteenth century, have gone hand in hand. The hardships of our present industrial crises, however, are not due to lack of natural resources, a failure in agricultural production to keep pace with population, or a weakness in industrial equipment. On the contrary, our productive machinery is capable of producing far more adequate supplies of necessities than ever in the past: what is lacking, under our present economic system is a means of spreading purchasing power in such a way as to expand the effective demand and thus keep industry and agriculture fully employed.

The problem, in the present state of American society, has nothing whatever to do with population: it is a matter of complicated economic readjustment, involving among other things the socialization of natural monopolies, the collective control of quasi-monopolies, the

wiping out of inflexible price structures that have no close relation to the costs of production or market demand, and the raising of real wages through trade union pressure on one hand and through the expansion of vital public works, financed by current taxation, on the other.

Although our productive plant in the past, even when in working order, did not provide a sufficient amount of goods and a sufficient annual income for the individual family, as the Brookings Institute Studies indicate, the potentialities of production are increased rather than diminished - in the present state of our natural resources - by the numerical increase of population. In short, it is only when our productive plant is out of gear that each newcomer, whether he be a native-born baby or a foreign-born adult, is a burden on the rest of the community.

At no point can the problem of regional planning be separated from that of ultimately controlling and directing, in the interests of the common welfare, the entire economic system. The wastes, the extravagances, the misuses of our natural resources, the disorder and the foul building of our cities are associated with an essentially disorderly economic life, based upon purely individual efforts at wealth, security, or aggrandizement. The Northwest has paid for these defects in duplicated railroad systems, in abandoned logging towns, and dead mining camps, in overbuilt boomtowns, and even in farms whose speculative prices placed an unbearable burden upon the cultivator.

If, however, we succeed by collective democratic methods during the next generation in overcoming the long crisis through which capitalism has been passing, our whole population policy should undergo a radical revision: instead of fearing newcomers, we must be ready to

welcome them. How many shall be brought in? Who shall they be? How and where shall they be accomodated? There are the problems to which public policy must address itself; and the sooner this reorientation is made, the more adequate will be the eventual answer to these problems.

SETTLEMENT AND REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION

At the present time the chief immigration into the Northwest is coming from the Dust Bowl and other submarginal agricultural areas. Those who make the move are chiefly farmers, urged by the prospect of finding better land, perhaps actually driven out of their original locality by misfortune. According to report, these newcomers are usually without sufficient capital to start in an independent life; and what is perhaps almost as great a handicap, they have little experience in the market gardening and fruit raising and mixed farming that can be practiced on the Pacific Coast.

Meanwhile, what the Northwest needs is a far more varied range of talent: it needs miners and industrial workers, it needs inventors, organizers, administrators, technicians; it needs scholars, scientists, artists: in short, it needs not one particular economic stratum but the whole range that constitute a human culture. Selective immigration should therefore aim at occupational variety: it was precisely that variety which gave to the German immigration after 1848 such an important influence in the development of the country.

Though a strong case may be made for a large increase in the population of the Northwest, one may well wish for that increase to be postponed until public policy, with the help of the various planning commissions, may have a better grasp of the essentials of rational regional distribution. And even here, one must wait, I believe, for the

regional planning committees themselves to achieve a better understanding of the task: at present, like the National Parks authorities, they show an unbecoming desire merely to follow the line of least resistance. That is the way of immediate accomplishment; but not necessarily of durable achievement.

The test of a policy of rational distribution has already come up in connection with the Columbia River Gorge. The factors involved are the present distribution of population, the installation of hydro-electric power, the erection of a regional distribution grid, and the development of a rate structure which shall give the highest social use as well as the widest economic use to this valuable resource. In connection with the exploitation of the Bonneville dam power, there seem to be a number of schools.

First School: industrial-development-at-any-price school. This group would treat the Bonneville dam as the immediate area to be exploited; and, forgetting the cost of a regional distribution system, they would favor the immediate use of power at the dam, by giving the lowest power rate to those who took power off the bus-bar. In doing this they would accomplish three undesirable things: first, they would deface the natural beauty of this extraordinary site beyond repair; and they would thereby offset the financial gain to the land speculator here by the commensurate loss to the tourist industry. Second: they would tend to crowd an industrial development, which should have ample space for expansion, on a natural site that is not merely costly to build on but absolutely uneconomic to house on a site that can be expanded only by letting industry dribble along the gorge at the water level, wherever a shelf of land occurs, and thus ruining the rest of

the scenery. Finally, this policy treats electric power as if it were constrained to suffer from the same disabilities as steam and coal, as if the transportation of electric power was, as in the case with coal, a legitimate charge.

As a matter of fact, once a power-grid is created, the only cost of transporting power is that of maintenance and upkeep: a very light cost. Within limits measured in hundreds of miles, the most distant plant is entitled to electricity at exactly the same price as the nearest plant: the fact that this is economical with electric power is exactly what gives it its specific social and economic significance. Once a grid is erected, industry should be placed at those points where it may serve the community to maximum advantage: it need no longer be tied to the point of origin, as the steam mill and the blast furnace were tied, more or less, to the coal mine.

Second School: The continued-congestion-for-profit school.

They would utilize electric power to concentrate population in points where it is already congested and badly housed: thus continue the dream of indefinite urban expansion upon which property values, until the deflation of 1929, and city plans, until the same moment, were based. This school is popular in Portland; but the fact is that that city has already overpassed the limits of effective and orderly growth. What is necessary is to build up an urban inter-region, on either side of Portland. The new development should have all the advantages of economic and durable townplanning: greenbelt towns with low cost housing should provide a special invitation to settlement by new industries. The proper location for these towns is where the valley opens up, about fifteen miles below the dam.

Third School: Spread-it-everywhere school. This school is the

diametric opposite of the first school. On the basis that the grid system makes power available wherever the grid touches, it would encourage the laying down of industries and the building up of communities wherever it suited the private needs of the enterprise, and without respect to what manner of community development took place. The premise is sound but the conclusion is not. Similarly, the automobile makes it possible for cities to spread over as vast a distance as Los Angeles; but both the social and the economic results of this spread are a terrific burden. For the economic laying down of utilities, for security against unemployment in a single industry, for the advantages of a many-sided social existence, population needs not merely to be decentralized but to be recentralized. Henry Wright made this very clear in his 1926 report on Planning the State of New York: in Oregon and Washington, no less than in the East, it is as important to empty out areas that can never be satisfactorily settled, because of distance, climate, or inferior resources, as it is to relieve the over-congested centers of their congestion. Hence the aim of a power system that seeks good social results must be to spread power to points of maximum advantage, and to concentrate city building and industrial expansion in those areas.

Conclusion: There is not the slightest excuse for the industrial spoilation of the great scenic assets of the Columbia Gorge. The place not to develop for industrial exploitation is the part of the valley that abuts the Bonneville dam. Neither should Portland expand further as a metropolis. The spotting of new sites that combine maximum number of advantages, without infringing upon the original beauties of nature should be the first duty of regional planning authorities

on both sides of the river.

PLANNING AUTHORITIES SHOULD PLAN

The existence of the Pacific Northwest Regional Planning Commission is an eloquent tribute to the original mistake made in laying out the states of the Northwest: particularly in the division between Oregon and Washington. People who pay more attention to abstract figures than to realities are accustomed to look upon a river as a dividing line: so it appears on maps. But even rivers with obstructive rapids and only occasional fords or bridges or navigable waters are dividing lines from only one point of view: military attack. From every other standpoint the river basin as a whole is a unit. Hence even in places where the rivers are as wide as the East River and the Hudson River in New York, the actual growth of the city took place on the Jersey and the Long Island shore facing the tip of the island, long before it took place on the upper sections of Manhattan Island itself.

To an outsider, one of the most patent facts about the present situation along the Columbia River Gorge is the undercurrent of rivalry that still exists between the respective states. Mere conference will not overcome that rivalry; economic interests, land holdings, port development facilities, industrial opportunities are all at stake, and the fact is that the Gorge as a whole must be treated as a unit from the point where it has its origin on American territory to the outlet on the Pacific: this is a matter that calls for an independent authority which will represent equally not merely the states involved but the rest of the country as well; for the latter has a special interest, not merely because of the national resources that have gone into the local development, but because the scenery itself is the pre-

cious heritage of every American and should be given due weight in every scheme of development.

With the experience of the Tennessee Valley behind, and with the active work done locally in Regional Planning to serve as counterweight, a new kind of regional authority should be developed to take care of this development. Such an authority should not be limited to survey and preparation like the existing authorities: it should be organized so as to carry out the details of the plan. But while it should include representatives of the states involved, like the New York-New Jersey Port Authority, it should not be dependent, for its detailed execution, upon the good will and funds provided by the State Legislatures. In the long run, such an authority would achieve a balance between local interests; and the general development would benefit equally each side of the valley: but in its day to day planning the authority should be capable of over-riding short-sighted local opposition; and it is necessary to ensure this in the original financial and administrative organization.

Unless such an authority is called into existence, and put immediately to work, it is doubtful if the best development of the Columbia River Valley can take place; and since this is a spinal development, of critical importance to every other part of the region, - including, of course, the whole Inland Empire - a failure to organize resolutely here will undermine other efforts at regional rehabilitation or improvement. One of the weaknesses of our present order of government is that too great a dependence is placed upon legislative initiative; and that initiative itself is curbed by being the subject of local pressures and appeals that tend to nullify each other, leaving action

itself at dead center.

The remedy for this is to create special executive authorities which shall include adequate local representation, but which shall not be hamstrung by conflicting local prejudices and pressures: above all, an authority that, once the fundamental policy has been laid down by legislative deliberation, can act in a firm and effective manner on behalf of the common good. Such commissions and authorities, as Dr. Max Lerner has pointed out in his recent book "It Is Later Than You Think", are the very bulwark of an effective democracy, in that they are able to meet and overcome the obstacles to sound economic development that arise out of popular inertia and specious economic pressures from private interests seeking a private rather than a public good. A Columbia River Planning Authority, with power to plan, to zone, to purchase and dispose of land, would not merely overcome the original mistake of making two states out of a common region; it would make possible that large scale resettlement of the old center and building of the new, which the present situation in the Northwest demands.

REGIONAL PLANNING IS NOT JUST RURAL PLANNING

One further observation derived from my survey and I will have done. In the office of Mr. Stanbery in Portland I came upon an admirable conspectus of the regional planning field: one of the best attempts systematically to outline the field and therefore the task of regional planning that I have seen. But after examining it carefully I noted that one element was lacking: no place had been assigned to the city and the things that the city represents.

Though the National Resources Board has issued an excellent report on Our Cities, it is still generally true, I believe, that the

whole concept of Regional Planning, as it has developed partly under stimulus from Washington during the last ten years, has stopped short at urban areas: from the standpoint of survey and plan, these may be represented, in most regional planning maps, as blank spaces.

The actual work done by various state authorities, such as highway commissions, only emphasizes this hiatus: highways and bridges which will have a drastic influence upon the distribution of population and the tax burdens of cities are planned right up to the city's limits - and sometimes into them - without the faintest respect for the municipal problems involved, still less without any attempt being made to bring the municipal authorities themselves into the planning picture. In Hawaii, for example, I found that the territorial engineer had planned a bridge for a central urban section of highway, and carried through his plans above the protest of both the City Engineer and the Parks Board Chairman, without the slightest concern for the eventual needs for a much broader parkway on either side of the bridge. Such a case is typical rather than exceptional.

Unfortunately for both the theory and practice of ignoring cities, most regional resources and activities actually come to a head in urban centers; hence the first requisite of good urban planning is that the regional setting should be included in the local problem, and the first need for good regional planning is that the ultimate destination, of population and goods, in village and city, should not be forgotten. I will go further than that: the critical problem all regional planning faces today is the problem of resettlement, that is, redistributing population in places of maximum advantage for life: in sites that are physically healthy and stimulating, with a sufficient underpinning of **natural** resources, with a sufficient supply of social facilities and cultural in-

institutions. To solve this problem without taking into account the character and composition of cities, without sketching in detail the new urban pattern, without providing for a proper distribution of the primitive, the rural, and the urban environments - to do this is impossible.

These matters cannot be left to local authorities: for one thing, the very solution of a local difficulty often demands a control over conditions that lie far beyond the legal limits of the municipality. The State of Washington has made a positive move in the right direction by its county zoning law; but the place in which to provide a sufficient background for intelligent local action is in the broader regional planning studies undertaken by the state. Without such studies, a good part of the work now being done by way of public works, bridges, tunnels, highway improvements, is not merely inefficient: in many cases it is actually mischievous. Meanwhile, equivalent sums of money spent on direct urban rehabilitation, would often obviate the very need for the grandiose engineering experiments to which we are all, by sheer inertia and fashion, too easily committed.

In this connection, incidentally, I should recommend the careful consideration of a policy recently broached by Mr. Nelson, of the National Association of Realty Boards, to provide the necessary funds to undertake the systematic renewal of urban areas. Without committing myself to that proposal in any particular detail, it seems to me that the point of view represented is sound: in the process of regional renewal, the restoration of blighted or sub-marginal urban land, the "reforestation" of urban culture, the prevention of social erosion, are as important as the coordinate work that must be done in the landscape and in industries.

LEWIS MUMFORD

Amenia, New York
January 3, 1939

